

Oath Taking

At the beginning of a new term of office, senators-elect take their oath of office from the presiding officer in an open session of the Senate before they can begin to perform their legislative activities. From the earliest days, the senator-elect—both the freshman and the returning veteran—has been escorted down the aisle by another senator to take the oath from the presiding officer. Customarily, the other senator from the senator-elect's state performs that ritual. Occasionally, the senator-elect chooses a senator from another state, either because the same-state colleague is absent or because the newly elected senator has sharp political differences with that colleague. Such public displays of these differences do not go unnoticed by journalists.

A ban on photography in the Senate chamber has led senators to devise an alternative way of capturing this highly symbolic moment in their Senate careers. In earlier times, the Vice President invited newly sworn senators and their families into his Capitol office for a re-enactment for home-state photographers. Beginning in the late 1970s, following the restoration of the Old Senate Chamber to its appearance at the time it went out of service in 1859, re-enactment ceremonies have been held in that deeply historical setting, resplendent in crimson and gold. (The old chamber, richly evocative of the Senate's mid-nineteenth-century so-called "golden age," is also the site of party leadership elections at the start of a new biennial Congress and of lectures related to the history and traditions of the Senate. In 1999, the Republican and Democratic party caucuses met together informally in that room, in secret session, to establish a general framework for the conduct of the Clinton impeachment trial.)